

STANDING UP FOR HUMANITY By

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On February 8, 1943, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) and the United States Army distributed applications for leave clearance titled "Statement of United States Citizenship of Japanese American Ancestry." All inmates seventeen and older were required to complete the questionnaire, one which was to provoke much confusion and disarray within internment camps. These "leave clearance" questionnaires included two particularly befuddling loyalty questions, 27 and 28, which put many Japanese-Americans in a sticky situation.

If I were one of the thousands of incarcerated Japanese-American citizens during World War II asked to pledge my allegiance to a country of which I could not even attain a valid citizenship, a country that had imprisoned my family and myself because of our ethnicity, my answer would be an easy decision: No. Furthermore, if they asked me if I would be willing to serve in their military, my answer would be the same: No. Even with the numerous consequences that would come with my chosen responses, I wouldn't change them for the world. The choice to be a "no-no boy," a Japanese-American who answered "no" to questions 27 and 28 on the loyalty questionnaire, would be quick and easy, as what "my" government was forcing upon my fellow countrymen was against everything our new country had been perceived to be: a land of justice, freedom, and hope.

Most Japanese-Americans answered affirmatively to the loyalty questions. Why would they do this despite the clear violation of their civil rights? One reason was that many Japanese-Americans were fearful of what the American government had the capability of doing to them. America's track record when it comes to handling those of non-European races is far from perfect; take for example the enslavement of African Americans and the incarceration and exploitation of Native Americans. Unfortunately, one of the main reasons Japanese-American citizens answered "yes" to questions 27 and 28 was that the loyalty questionnaire form was misleadingly labeled the "Application for Leave Clearance"(Burton). This led many to believe that if they answered with "yes", they would be released from incarceration. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case; in fact, those who answered "yes" to the loyalty questions were either sent to the military or remained incarcerated.

Contrary to what the American government assumed, most Japanese-Americans who didn't comply with the loyalty questions didn't do so because they were in alliance with Japan or their emperor. Most Japanese-Americans who answered "no" to these infamous questions did so because they resented being incarcerated for absolutely no viable reason. Moreover, there were obvious flaws in the loyalty questions; for example, question 27 asked if Japanese-Americans were willing to serve in the U.S. Army on combat duty. A large portion of Japanese-Americans were Issei, first generation

Japanese immigrants, whose average age was 54 (Questions). So for them, serving in the armed forces was inconceivable; they had families to care for. Question 28 asked for the unqualified allegiance of the Japanese-Americans and a forswearing of any allegiance to the Japanese emperor or government (Lyon). This was also a problem for the Issei, as they weren't allowed American citizenship, so their only citizenship was in Japan. The Nisei, U.S. born Japanese-Americans, were in a similar conundrum. If their parents, often the Issei, rejected the loyalty questions and they complied with them, as many of them did, there would surely be a physical and emotional separation between them. Sixty-eight percent of those incarcerated at Tule Lake were Nisei, and the vast majority went there following their parents (Sunada). Those who understood that their civil rights were violated not only answered "no" to the loyalty questions, they also requested repatriation and compensation for their unjust incarceration. Regrettably, these outcries of injustice were ignored, and a far worse, unwarranted punishment lay in wait for the no-no boys.

The American government, out of racial prejudice and fear, believed that those who rejected the loyalty questions were in correspondence with Japan or its emperor. In response, the consequence of forswearing the loyalty questions was separation from other inmates and isolation at an internment camp called Tule Lake. The conditions at Tule Lake were filthy and overcrowded. Riots and protests were commonplace. Those who protested against their imprisonment were often sent to federal jail, and the military was often used to keep inmates under control (Sunada). For Japanese-Americans, Tule Lake was the last place they wanted to be.

The abiding consequence of a no-no boy was a shunning from the Japanese-American community. Immediately after the end of the war, when Japanese-Americans were released from the internment camps, it became blatantly obvious that the Japanese community had become segregated. Since the bulk of those in internment camps answered the loyalty questions with "yes", they considered those who didn't "disloyal traitors" (Niiya). This was because those who answered "yes" to the loyalty questions were drafted into the army, and were now considered patriots and heroes for their service to the United States. Therefore, those who refused to join the military were considered lesser than those who did. No-no boys were highly stigmatized for years after World War II.

No-no boys often refused to speak about their answers for many years because they were afraid of segregation from their community. In the past, when the U.S. government sent Native Americans to internment camps similar to those endured by the Japanese-Americans, Native Americans with European blood would often escape and attempt to hide their Native origins out of shame and fear. Patriotism had its ramifications, and unfortunately one of them was the decades-long segregation of those Japanese-Americans who answered yes-yes and those who answered no-no on the loyalty questionnaire. This consequence is the most profound, as it essentially split a nationality into two.

The Fifth Amendment to our constitution states that “No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a grand jury” (Fifth). The United States government bypassed the Fifth Amendment using in its defense that Japanese-Americans were a military threat to our country. This was completely erroneous. It doesn't matter whether or not they committed a crime in the first place; one's rights exist because one's *inalienable* rights are guaranteed by existence. It is because of this that the no-no boys exist. It is because of this that these atrocious *loyalty questions* were answered with a resounding “No!” by brave individuals who understood that their civil rights were violated.

Henceforth, I stand by my decision to be a no-no boy. Be it Germany, be it Vietnam, be it the United States; any country that violates my civil rights is a country that I repudiate. I would rather renounce my citizenship with the minority that did so rather than let my humanity be taken away from me, like the majority of incarcerated Japanese Americans did, willingly or unwillingly. Even if it meant segregation from my family, my community, or the rest of the world, being remembered for standing up for my humanity is much better than being remembered for standing immobile for blatant racism and unjust incarceration.

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